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Ethicists Failing Ethics: Citation Practice for Sexual Misconduct

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how to engage with the work of ethicists facing public allegations of professional sexual misconduct. Rather than disengaging or proceeding as usual, we propose citing their work alongside impartial information about credible allegations. We choose to isolate the work of ethicists as the target of this proposal because ethicists are distinct on two fronts: they are distinct among philosophers because they have moral authority, and distinct among others with moral authority, such as religious leaders and civil rights activists, because their power is reproduced in part through citations. Our approach offers a nuanced perspective on the power conferred through citations. We argue that individual scholars have a moral and intellectual responsibility to cite using this practice, especially when institutional enforcement of justice is lacking.

1. Introduction: the need for change

Philosophy is failing in regard to internal ethical oversight. Recent high-profile cases suggest policies and norms within academia are still lacking.¹ Allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct go unchecked despite increased public scrutiny.² Accusers seeking redress through Title IX or other official university channels face immense barriers spanning confidential processes, community silence, systemic sexism hindering investigations, and more (Bedera 2023; Lorenz et al. 2021; Weinberg 2017). Academic institutions frequently fall short of shielding victims from abuses of power within their own halls (Coy et al. 2022).

Despite this dire state of affairs, many argue for continued engagement with ideas from scholars accused of professional sexual misconduct based on intellectual merits (Flaherty 2016). While acknowledging that there may be value to the intellectual contributions of scholars accused of professional sexual misconduct, we argue that continued engagement should come with a caveat: scholars citing the work of ethicists implicated by credible professional sexual misconduct allegations should impartially acknowledge the allegations in footnotes.³

In section 2, we argue for the claim that ethicists have moral authority that gives them a distinct kind of power to shape moral discourse. There have been well-documented, high-profile professional sexual misconduct allegations against philosophers in other subfields.⁴ However, we choose to narrow the scope of our argument within philosophy to the field of ethics because ethicists are distinct on two fronts: they are distinct among philosophers because they have moral authority, and distinct among others with moral authority, such as religious leaders and civil rights activists, because their power is reproduced in part through citations of academic work.

In section 3, building on the claim that ethicists have moral authority, we introduce the citation practice and argue for the benefits of what we term an author-centered approach. We provide practical guidance on how to formulate the citation, how to discern which sources to include, and when to cite using the proposal.⁵ The effects of this citation practice will compound to make more people aware of the allegations and thus able to conduct research responsibly. Our citation practice provides a balanced alternative between uncritically citing ethicists accused of professional sexual misconduct and completely disengaging with their work. Our citation practice also complements existing measures, such as open letters and conference boycotts, which, despite demonstrating collective commitment to change, have notable strategic limitations.

In section 4, we delve into further objections and address a range of concerns, including whether the proposed citation practice might compromise free ethical inquiry, how to guard against wrongful allegations, and how best to respect the wishes of victims.

In the concluding section, we raise broader questions for ongoing discourse. We consider the implications of these principles for other academic fields, and the possibility of extending this citation practice to address different forms of injustice.

2. Ethicists, moral authority, and citations

In this section, we proceed to argue:

P1. Ethicists have moral authority.

P2. Citations amplify an ethicist's moral authority.

P3. Credible allegations of professional sexual misconduct can undermine that moral authority.

P4. If an ethicist's moral authority can be undermined by credible allegations of professional sexual misconduct, then citations of their work ought to include information about the allegations.

C. Therefore, when citing an ethicist with credible allegations of professional sexual misconduct against them, we should include information about the allegations.

2.1. *Ethicists have moral authority*

In this section, we argue that the public generally assumes that ethicists are personally committed to living morally—the “virtue assumption.” Ethicists also have recognized expertise in moral matters. When both the virtue assumption and perceived expertise are attributed to them, they are conferred moral authority: a power to shape moral discourse and guide personal or societal behavior.

Ethicists, in particular, fit what philosophers of education Tina Besley, Liz Jackson, and Michael A. Peters term a “virtue assumption,” a widespread public perception that philosophers are moral people. Besley, Jackson, and Peters identify a popular assumption that philosophers are more moral than ordinary people:

There is a popular belief emanating from ancient Greek times, carried forward in the last century by Kohlberg and others, that philosophers are wiser and more moral than ordinary people. We believe and expect philosophers to be virtuous or at least practiced in ethical reasoning and therefore more inclined to be good, knowing what is at stake in pursuing the good life. Call this the “virtue assumption”. Philosophers are often also teachers of virtue and we expect teachers to be exemplary role models or meet criteria of being professionals, including codes of ethics. (2022, 2423)⁶

They identify a longstanding tradition of viewing ethicists as “teachers of virtue” who should serve as exemplary role models in the very domains they study—in the case of ethicists, this domain is morality. Ancient philosophers consistently emphasize that those engaged in ethical inquiry must hold themselves to higher standards of personal conduct, as their understanding and teaching of virtue demand that they embody the virtues they espouse. Socrates, as depicted in Plato’s *Apology* (38a), exemplifies this by living in accordance with his principles, valuing virtue over life itself. Plato, in the *Republic* (VI, 487a–489d), asserts that philosophers, especially those in positions of moral authority like the philosopher kings, must embody justice and the good to lead effectively. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (II, 1103b), argues that knowledge of ethics is incomplete without the habitual practice of virtue, thus demanding ethical consistency from those who teach it.⁷

Ethics, by its very definition, deals with normative, prescriptive, and evaluative matters, rather than purely factual or descriptive ones, and thus involves appeals to values and ideals (Mills 2005, 166). Charles Mills asserts that the ultimate, uncontroversial goal of ethics is to guide our actions and help us become better people (2005, 170). If the purpose of ethics is to guide our actions, then an ethicist’s role cannot be entirely detached from a commitment to living in accordance with the values and ideals their work promotes. Thus, the virtue assumption holds most naturally for ethicists.

This professional commitment to morality aligns ethicists with other figures of moral guidance, such as religious leaders and civil rights activists, who are similarly expected to embody the values they promote. This perception differentiates them from figures in other professions, such as artists or poets, where the moral character of the individual is more easily separated from the value of their work. In aesthetics, the debate about whether one can “separate the art from the artist” has long been a contentious issue (Nannicelli 2020; Kaube et al. 2023). However, in the realm of ethics, such separation is far less tenable, because the credibility of an ethicist is fundamentally intertwined with their perceived commitment to morality. Thus, when an ethicist violates ethical norms, it is not merely a personal failing but a transgression that can undermine their moral authority.

Mary Kate McGowan defines authority as having “powers conferred upon one that enables one to do things that others cannot do” (2019, 65–6).⁸ This kind of authority is distinct from but related to expertise. McGowan gives the example of experts in antique furniture who are enabled to appraise antiques by virtue of their specialized knowledge. The experts’ technical knowledge alone does not compel others to accept their evaluations, but it is the basis on which they are granted the power and standing to issue assessments. Following McGowan, the expertise of ethicists enables them to do things—such as initiate moral discourse and guide personal and societal behaviors—that non-ethicists cannot do (at least not in quite the same capacity). By virtue of subject matter, the authority that ethicists possess can be rightly termed moral authority.

Ethicists' moral authority is not merely enabled by their expertise in ethical theory; it is also tied to the virtue assumption, held by students and the general public, that ethicists are personally committed to upholding the moral standards they advocate.⁹ This moral authority does not depend on whether ethicists actually behave more ethically than others. Indeed, one survey found no evidence that ethicists perform better than non-ethicists in everyday moral behaviors (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014, 316–20). A similar study in German-speaking countries produced comparable results (Schönegger and Wagner 2019). Nevertheless, these empirical findings do not negate ethicists' capacity to initiate moral discourse and guide personal or societal behavior. Rather, what matters is the public's willingness to heed their guidance—an influence that can persist even if people are mistaken in assuming ethicists to be virtuous.

One might argue that ethicists do not have such an influence. But, in reality, work by ethicists permeates popular discourse, suggesting that the moral authority of ethicists, if not formalized, is at least recognized in practice. When academic ethicists pen op-eds on ethical issues or give talks to non-academic audiences, they trade on the public perception that ethicists have moral authority.¹⁰ Even if ethicists do not do such public-facing work, so long as the platforms and opportunities are available to them, this is evidence that the public views ethicists as possessing moral authority. Even if the public is mistaken about ethicists having moral authority, some ethicists can and do take advantage of that perceived moral authority in order to commit sexual misconduct.¹¹ Consequently, ethicists must contend with this perception in their professional conduct and public engagement.

One might also argue that ethicists should not be perceived as moral authorities; their expertise and authority in ethics is analogous to a physicist's expertise in physics, distinct from their personal lives and behaviors. Under this view, it is misguided to expect ethicists to behave more ethically than others; the real issue lies in the public's mistaken assumption. If that is the case, our citation practice does not get at the correct target, the public. To disabuse the public of their mistaken perception, the ethicists themselves or the institutions employing them could make a blanket disclaimer stating that ethicists should not be expected to be more ethical than non-ethicists.

However, there are a few issues with making such a blanket disclaimer. Even if people are told to not expect an ethicist to be more ethical than non-ethicists, some ethicists can and do use their expertise in ethics to abuse their power.¹² At worst, correcting the public's perception could resemble a kind of victim-blaming, as if they should have known better than to take some ethicists at their word. Moreover, a blanket disclaimer groups all unethical actions together, leveling the playing field between gross abuses of power and minor indiscretions, which is intuitively unsatisfying. Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, it is worth asking what it says about ethics as a field that, in order for individual ethicists to be divested of their power as perceived moral authorities, the entire field has to publicly claim that no one should expect ethicists to be more ethical than non-ethicists.

If ethicists fail to adhere to the moral principles they espouse, their actions might be seen as an egregious form of hypocrisy, or a mismatch between an agent's practices and his prescriptions.¹³ Yet the issue is not so much whether an ethicist practices what they preach, if they preach anything at all. We want to make a stronger claim: credible allegations of professional sexual misconduct by ethicists can undermine their moral authority. Take, for example, a crude act-utilitarian who thinks any deed is permissible if it maximizes aggregate pleasure. He can, within his own theory, rationalize harming his students whenever he deems the hedonic calculus favorable. Although his conduct is

reprehensible, it is not hypocrisy in the strict sense, because he practices what he preaches. What it does illustrate, however, is an abuse of the moral authority society grants him.

Moral anti-realists, who deny the existence of objective moral facts, may argue that ethicists do not hold moral authority. If objective moral truths do not exist, they might ask, how can ethicists shape moral discourse and guide personal or societal behavior? The moral authority of ethicists does not rest on their possessing objective moral truths, but rather on the virtue assumption and their perceived expertise with moral matters. The moral authority of ethicists may be seen as *de facto* rather than *de jure*, stemming from their role in shaping moral discourse and providing frameworks for ethical reflection, rather than from possession of moral truths. Even if the argument in question is that there are no moral facts, the ethicist advancing the argument is in a position to shape moral discourse and its practical implications.

As Isserow and Klein point out, moral authorities function beyond merely discussing moral facts—they shape the moral discourse surrounding those arguments and their uptake (2017, 195–97). Isserow and Klein cite empirical work from Schwitzgebel and Rust (2009) to show that epistemic authority alone is insufficient for moral authority. Isserow and Klein say that ethicists “would seem to be prime candidates for moral experts,” but their failure to match theoretical knowledge to practice makes them fall short. Yet they go on to say that moral authorities “occupy a trusted position, and so they do have a correspondingly greater responsibility to get things right” as experts (Isserow and Klein 2017, 196). While their view that ethicists have epistemic authority but fall short of practical authority might seem at odds with calling ethicists moral authorities, the view is compatible with our distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* moral authority. Ethicists may not be entitled to moral authority based on their behavior, but they nonetheless occupy trusted positions, and thus they have the social standing required to be termed moral authorities (2017, 194).

Do we claim that the less practically oriented an ethicist’s area of research, the less moral authority she holds? We claim, rather, that no professional ethicist can be viewed as entirely insulated from demands of practical ethical leadership stemming from their institutionally conferred position of moral authority. All ethicists possess moral authority to a degree, without a distinction in kind.¹⁴ Even the most esoteric metaethicist may have moral authority to a degree, by virtue of, say, teaching normative ethics courses, since they can shape moral discourse and behavior through teaching.¹⁵

2.2. Citations amplify an ethicist’s moral authority

Most simply, what we do when we cite someone is we list their name and their work. The author’s name allows them to receive credit for their work, credit which in turn confers on them professional status and influence.¹⁶ We claim that when we cite, we amplify the moral authority of ethicists, precisely by this conferral of status and influence.

Citations amplify the moral authority of ethicists specifically, as opposed to non-academics with moral authority such as religious leaders and civil rights activists. One key difference between ethicists and other moral authorities is that ethicists exercise their authority primarily through written academic work, in addition to avenues like public speaking and teaching. Publications constitute the core artifact, and citations the currency, of the ethicist’s trade. It is through their academic publications that ethicists stake their claims, advance arguments, and position themselves within the discourses that shape our understanding of morality and its real-world applications. As Kieran

Healy notes, “[t]he usual way that a scholar comes to influence their field is quite simply by writing a book or article that everyone wants to talk about. It must be discussed directly, or one must explain why talking about it in more detail can be avoided. Either way, you have to cite it” (2013). Hence, our suggested proposal primarily focuses on citation practices in academic writing.

Academics construct reputational narratives with citations, which are both products and producers of academic culture. Citations have material implications, such as influencing job opportunities and promotions. Citation practices construct and reinforce historical narratives: narratives about who has epistemic authority, who deserves to influence future scholars, and what kinds of characters make up the history of philosophy.¹⁷ Even a brief citation weaves a figure into a narrative and enables that figure to influence future research. As Sara Ahmed writes, “[c]itation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before” as well as “the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings” (2017, 15–16). As academics, when we make even cursory references, we participate in shaping scholarly influence, legacy, and collective understanding.

2.3. The distinctness of professional sexual misconduct

Among the various abuses of power that moral authorities may commit, professional sexual misconduct carries significant historical weight, particularly due to its deep connections with systemic discrimination and gendered abuse. We consider misconduct professional when it is characterized by actions that violate the ethical standards, rules, or norms within a professional setting, and involve an abuse of the roles and responsibilities associated with one’s professional position. Unlike other forms of professional misconduct, such as plagiarism, undisclosed conflicts of interest, or breaches of contractual obligations, professional sexual misconduct is distinctively tied to broader patterns of social and institutional injustice.¹⁸

While acts like plagiarism or failing to disclose conflicts of interest are certainly unethical, they do not reflect the same enduring cultural patterns of gender inequality, power imbalances, and systematic marginalization of and discrimination against certain groups. Therefore, we can delineate cases of sexual misconduct from other ethical breaches because they are not merely professional lapses; they are part of a wider continuum of social injustice. We do not rule out that there could be other kinds of professional misconduct that are tied to systemic discrimination, like racism and transphobia, and thus carry a comparable weight to professional sexual misconduct. The same citation practices might be adopted in those cases, but further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

In cases of professional sexual misconduct, it is particularly important to speak out and distance oneself from the wrongdoers. This urgency arises from several interconnected factors. First, the pervasive and gendered nature of professional sexual misconduct reflects deep-seated societal and institutional patterns of inequality and abuse. Professional sexual misconduct is not an isolated phenomenon but a widespread issue that disproportionately affects certain groups, reinforcing systemic gender-based discrimination and power imbalances. Second, repeated institutional failures to adequately address and rectify instances of professional sexual misconduct have compounded the problem. Many institutions have been criticized for their inadequate responses, often failing to provide effective mechanisms for reporting, investigating, and sanctioning misconduct. This ongoing failure not only allows perpetrators to continue their behavior with impunity, but

also signals a broader tolerance of such behavior within professional environments. Third, the frequent silencing and shaming of victims further necessitate a proactive stance. Victims of professional sexual misconduct often face significant barriers when coming forward, including fear of retaliation, damage to their reputation or career, and the emotional toll of public scrutiny and victim-blaming. This culture of silence and shame serves to protect wrongdoers and perpetuate cycles of abuse.

Why do we focus on professional sexual misconduct, rather than personal sexual misconduct? While personal sexual misconduct is undoubtedly also serious and harmful, it typically does not involve the same institutional power dynamics or professional obligations. Professional misconduct by ethicists, particularly in the realm of sexual misconduct, is especially concerning because it exploits the unique authority ethicists hold within their professional roles. As ethicists and professors, they hold significant responsibilities, including educating students, mentoring colleagues, and contributing to ethical discourse. When they engage in professional sexual misconduct, they abuse their power and violate the trust of their academic community and the broader public. Sexual misconduct disrupts professional relationships, erodes trust in the institution, and can perpetuate a culture of silence and complicity. Even sexual misconduct happening in private settings can count as professional sexual misconduct. The decisive factor is the use (or reasonable perception) of professional leverage, like hiring power, networking access, and *quid pro quo* professional favors.

In this section, we argued that ethicists possess moral authority that makes them distinct from other philosophers. Since the moral authority of ethicists is conferred in part through citations, we showed that ethicists are distinct from other moral authorities such as religious leaders and civil rights activists. Finally, we argued that professional sexual misconduct is distinct among forms of misconduct that a moral authority might commit, because sexual misconduct carries historical weight as a systematic injustice. By justifying our focus on ethicists, citations, and professional sexual misconduct, we thus set the scope of our proposal. In the next section, we lay out the details of the citation practice and argue for its benefits.

3. The citation practice and its benefits

Since we confer power to ethicists through citations, we should not confer it uncritically. By citing the work of accused ethicists without acknowledging grave sexual misconduct allegations against them, scholars unwittingly empower and amplify the influence of those ethicists. This amplification in turn silences victims while enabling the accused to maintain the same level of moral authority. The target of the citation is the individual ethicist; every citation of that individual's theory, regardless of which theory it is, should include the allegations. We leave it to the reader to decide if and how the theory should be reassessed based on the information in the citation. Our failure to acknowledge allegations of misconduct perpetuates injustice, whether consciously or not. At the very least, a failure to acknowledge them is irresponsible.

When citing the work of accused ethicists, we suggest including the following information in a footnote: "Some believe ethicists' conduct is relevant to the assessment of their view. X was accused of sexual misconduct (third-party source or sources)."¹⁹ We propose that the footnote is intended solely to provide a link to the source. The author is not prompted to interject personal opinions or stipulations derived from the sources, but rather to maintain an impartial stance regarding the allegation. In this section, we discuss the practicalities and the benefits of implementing the citation practice.

3.1. *How and when to cite*

Considering potential legal threats to authors and victims alike, we advocate for a careful incorporation of public information in academic articles. This includes linking to sources that reference official court records or reputable news articles, aiming to strike a balance between ethical responsibility and legal safeguards. With regard to which cases warrant citation, we propose two potential criteria to ensure optimum objectivity and relevance. First, we suggest that cases which have been brought before an official administrative body—whether a university or a criminal court—should be considered. This would differentiate cases that have undergone formal processes from those merely circulating on social media without verification. The resulting official documents can be cited. Second, we propose that cases covered by reputable mainstream media could serve as another threshold. While this criterion is less stringent, it would still help filter out allegations that have not been rigorously fact-checked, focusing instead on cases with verifiable information.²⁰

How should researchers who are unaware of public claims handle this citation practice? If scholars already know of professional sexual misconduct allegations, they can include a footnote. If not, they do not need to investigate every ethicist they cite. Because many people in the profession are already aware of numerous allegations, this modest approach would still yield a substantial number of relevant footnotes, gradually increasing awareness as more scholars become informed. Instead of undertaking extensive research on their own, scholars can check a centralized resource such as the Academic Sexual Misconduct Database, which provides third-party documentation of sexual misconduct by discipline (Libarkin, 2025). We envision a third-party, institutionally maintained database that offers verified updates and input from all relevant parties. The existence of a one-person-run resource shows that a more comprehensive and regularly updated system is feasible with adequate support. This would allow scholars to reference a transparent and reliable database while also addressing concerns about objectivity, including potential false allegations, dismissed court cases, or lack of due process.

Should we still disclose the misconduct of ethicists, even if the primary readers are other philosophers who do not view ethicists as having moral authority? Yes: this practice should account for the widest possible audience, regardless of the technical nature of the work. While fellow ethicists might insist on distinguishing between the ethical arguments presented and the personal conduct of the ethicist, students and general readers often view ethicists as figures of moral authority. Thus, the responsibility to readers extends beyond the immediate philosophical community and includes potential audience like students and the broader public.

Would including sexual misconduct allegations be excessive when ethicists are only cited in passing? When an author finds herself referencing a substantial number of articles by different ethicists, she might find a proliferation of such footnotes unwieldy and impractical, especially given the space limitations in journals. In such scenarios, the author can adopt a more measured stance. Rather than attempting to comprehensively assess the ethical standing of every cited figure, the author should, at a minimum, adopt the citation practice when seriously engaging with the works of certain ethicists.

What about ethicists who are dead or no longer active in the field? One might think that our proposal is only useful for citing ethicists who are still alive and working in professional philosophy, because only active philosophers are in a position to abuse their power in the future. That worry would relegate our proposal to a preventive measure.

Yet even for ethicists who are no longer active, citations contribute to the construction and preservation of their intellectual legacy and place in the history of philosophy. Our proposal acknowledges the ongoing impact of past figures. The legacies of past philosophers continue to exert influence within academic circles, and thus still hold power. Since citing ethicists with allegations attached contributes to the construction of lasting narratives, dead ethicists should be cited this way too, so that their legacy is narrated with accuracy.

In the rare instance where institutional accountability measures succeed in providing just outcomes, would the proposed citation practice be unfairly punitive? Even in cases where outcomes are to some degree just and favorable to victims, it is still worth including information about those cases in citations. Our proposed citation practice can provide a degree of accountability where institutional measures fail, but it is also, crucially, a record of the misconduct so that the power conferred through citations is tempered by an even distribution of facts.

What if the accused admitted to what happened and took all necessary steps to compensate the victim? Should the accused still be included in the citation? We are not aware of a precedent for such a case of reconciliation in the field of ethics or elsewhere in philosophy. It appears that the current incentive structure is configured in a way that discourages anyone accused of professional sexual misconduct from admitting the misconduct, as it may result in termination, among other consequences. As long as the accused maintains denial, the university and legal complexities seem to favor their position. Alternatively, if an admission of misconduct were made, it would likely be newsworthy and documented publicly. In such instances, readers can once again assess the situation independently.

3.2. *The pragmatic middle ground*

One significant benefit of our citation practice is that it occupies a practical middle ground between two extremes: citing ethicists accused of professional sexual misconduct as usual, or completely avoiding citing them. As a result, our approach avoids the issues that can arise from either stance.

Some scholars advocate for continued engagement with the accused ethicists' work as usual. Addressing sexual misconduct allegations against one prominent ethicist, Justin Weinberg argues that the alleged behavior, despite its reprehensibility, does not affect the ethicist's philosophical views. Weinberg even suggests that removing his work from syllabi would be "antiphilosophical," and Brian Leiter has similarly called such exclusions a form of "malpractice" (Flaherty 2016). Both scholars frame continued engagement with the ethicist's work as a neutral stance on the allegations. As argued prior, we disagree with this characterization. Transparently contextualizing the allegations in citations as well as in classrooms is more faithful to philosophy's truth-seeking essence. It is more "philosophical" to allow students and readers to decide for themselves without forcing their hand in one direction or the other—this is the truly neutral stance.

Why not, in our research, disengage completely with the work of ethicists accused of professional sexual misconduct? The strong position of disengaging completely with the work of problematic figures has a precedent, but it also carries risks. Ahmed highlights the challenges of disrupting citational norms in academia, particularly when omitting works due to ethical concerns such as sexism or racism. Ahmed chooses, in *Living a Feminist Life*, to not cite white men at all (2017, 15). Even Ahmed herself acknowledges that "[t]his is a very blunt citational policy" (2017, 270) and that she is "not always going

to have this policy: it is a writing experiment; a social experiment. I will cite white men again, just as I have cited them before” (2014). Refusing to cite certain influential figures is often negatively perceived as reckless, severing ties vital for one’s own progress and acceptance within academic culture. Moreover, refusing to engage with the work of accused ethicists can entail significant epistemic costs. For instance, if their arguments genuinely advance our understanding or bring us closer to the truth, dismissing them outright could hinder valuable progress in ethical inquiry.

What about reframing the theory of problematic ethicists as one source among many, rather than the authoritative source? While this reframing attempts to reduce the influence of such figures, it is often too subtle to meaningfully address the issue. Citations, by their very nature, confer professional power—the kind of power that has often been abused in cases of professional sexual misconduct. Simply reframing a figure’s work as one source among others does little to dismantle the professional authority and influence that citations inherently reinforce. What about, rather than citing a morally problematic figure, prioritizing and emphasizing the work of another scholar who presents similar arguments? A virtue of this approach is that it takes seriously the power of citations. However, there may be instances where serious engagement with such figures is unavoidable.

Our proposal serves as a practical middle ground between two conflicting approaches: completely disengaging or deprioritizing citing ethicists accused of professional sexual misconduct, and disregarding the allegations by continuing to cite their work as usual. Prominent thinkers’ ubiquitous influence often makes total disengagement impractical. Moreover, opting not to cite a valuable work can incur significant epistemic costs by leaving a critical gap in ongoing debates. On the other hand, once a prominent thinker has been credibly accused of professional sexual misconduct, leaving the integrity of their research unquestioned risks giving the false impression that influence alone licences an uncritical approach. The opposite of disengagement—engagement without mention of the credible allegations—is morally and intellectually irresponsible. Our approach ensures a way to engage responsibly without dismissing their work entirely.

While some may argue that imposing such a burden upon authors exacerbates the already arduous task of publication, we contend that this undertaking is a necessary aspect of the scholarly endeavor. The additional deliberation required to address potential ethical concerns associated with cited sources should be viewed not as an extraneous burden, but as a necessary and integral component of the intellectual rigor already demanded by the discipline.

Imagine doing research that centers around the work of one thinker, only to learn, after your research is published, of serious allegations of professional sexual misconduct against that person. Learning the relevant facts may lead researchers to see their own work in a different light.²¹ Thus, including information about professional sexual misconduct allegations is intellectually responsible, allowing researchers and readers to apprise the allegations when engaging the work of the accused and, consequently, to independently assess the extent to which the allegations impact the ideas.

3.3. A complement to open letters and conference boycotts

Another benefit of our citation practice is that it serves as a complementary measure to open letters and conference boycotts. Presently, one prevalent response to the problem of sexual misconduct in academic philosophy is the initiation of open letter campaigns

(Flaherty 2015a). Open letters are evidence of a commitment, shared by many, to change the profession (Saul 2014). However, open letters have several strategic shortcomings.

Open letters, while a customary response, tend to be contingent on the severity of the case, the prominence of the accused, and the public attention garnered by the case. Moreover, their enduring impact is not guaranteed. At worst, such efforts prove ephemeral, as when the web link to an open letter vanished from public accessibility (Google Sites *n.d.*). Open letters may raise awareness for a time, but the community momentum drummed up in signing the document inevitably dies off as bystanders to misconduct move on with their lives. While open letters are sometimes effective statements of solidarity with victims, there have also been cases where academics rushed to write a letter in defense of accused professors, then rescinded their signatures when more incriminating information came to light.²² This demonstrates that open letters can sometimes be premature and based on incomplete information, whether they side with the victim or the accused. Our approach, therefore, emphasizes linking to impartial sources without making personal judgments. This helps ensure that the discussion remains fair and balanced, avoiding the pitfalls of prematurely taking sides. In addition, a footnote in a published article has more longevity than an open letter.

There have been instances of open letters circulated within the philosophical community that express an unwillingness to extend invitations to certain scholars accused of sexual misconduct to participate in conferences. There have similarly been refusals to attend conferences where such individuals are invited (Flaherty 2016). This form of boycott stems from a principled stance—to avoid conferring further stature and platforms which could be perceived as enabling continued unethical conduct, as well as to disassociate from being complicit in such ethical breaches. One academic claimed that “asking people to participate in a conference co-organized by [the accused ethicist] is tantamount to asking them to pretend that [the ethicist’s] moral authority is not at issue.” Moreover, it asks people to pretend “the academic benefit conferred by such an invitation couldn’t be used by him as . . . a tool of sexual harassment” (Kingkade 2016). Yet disinviting someone from a conference while continuing to cite their work leaves the moral authority conferred through written work and citations intact. The act of academic citation represents a more evaluative and enduring conferral of scholarly legitimacy than participating in a conference, which is a relatively transient form of recognition. Therefore, a more critical approach to academic citations should be adopted alongside disassociations in public avenues.

In conclusion, while open letters and boycotts raise awareness and show solidarity, their effectiveness is often limited by the context, and their impact may fade over time as community attention shifts. Our proposed citation practice can complement open letters and conference boycotts as a more consistent and enduring stand against unethical behavior, aligning professional practices with the moral standards expected of the field.

3.4. Author-centered vs. editor-centered approach

One could argue that the burden of addressing problematic citation practices should lie with journal editors and reviewers, rather than individual authors. The reasoning is that journals, as the gatekeepers of academic publishing, have significant influence and institutional power to set publishing norms. Following this logic, journal editors could establish clear guidelines for proper citation practices, to which authors would then be expected to adhere. By embedding expectations around inclusive and representative

citation practices directly into their submission requirements and review processes, journal editors could be effective in helping to normalize and institutionalize such standards.

However, we should not be too quick to overstate the potential efficacy of an editor-centered approach (or conversely, dismiss the grassroots value of an author-centered approach). There can be institutional inertia and resistance from journals and publishers when it comes to upholding progressive publishing norms. An illustrative case involves the withdrawal of a book chapter on sexual misconduct by Routledge due to legal threats, including those from a professor claiming identification in the content (Jack 2023).²³ The Routledge example shows that relying solely on journals to drive change may be insufficient, as editors may be reluctant to buck established practices and take a principled stand against sexual misconduct.

Perhaps the most effective strategy would be to pursue a multi-pronged approach, where author-initiated citation practices and editor-mandated requirements work in tandem. As more authors voluntarily adopt inclusive citation patterns, this could gradually shift the broader academic culture, making it easier for journals to codify such norms into their formal guidelines.²⁴ The author-centered and editor-centered approaches need not be mutually exclusive, and in fact may be most effective when deployed in a complementary manner. Both avenues are important as we work toward a more just and informative scholarly discourse. Our proposal calls for shifts at the individual and institutional level. Minimally, we propose that authors shoulder a burden to research misconduct cases and include them in published academic work, *and* that journal editors and reviewers not see such inclusion as grounds for dismissal or rejection.²⁵

4. Response to objections

In this section, we address additional objections and concerns.

4.1. *Misrepresentation*

Can our citation practice encourage sound-bite-style engagement with cases of professional sexual misconduct, reducing ethicists to a headline about professional sexual misconduct and encouraging readers to take the cases out of context? We grant that any work can be taken out of context, but no author can prohibit readers from misusing their work in this way. By linking to third-party sources, scholars who implement our citation practice would not pass judgment or offer additional commentary, but instead promote responsible engagement with the facts. Any academic author operates to an extent on trust that their audience will read their work without grossly distorting the claims by taking them out of context. The same applies here: taking a citation out of context merely to stoke controversy on the internet would be a misuse of the text on the part of the reader.

4.2. *Other considerations*

One might object that the demands of morally and intellectually responsible scholarship outlined here can be outweighed by other moral and intellectual considerations. What if, for example, citing an ethicist's professional sexual misconduct makes it less likely that their theory is implemented as public policy, and the potential benefits that the ethicist's

theory could bring if implemented outweigh the harms of their misconduct? Can the potential good of a theory override the reasons to adopt our citation practice? We contend that the answer is no: though we motivate our citation practice with the principle that citations confer power, we do not advocate acting from utilitarian calculations of benefit and harm, nor are we cynical about the capacities of readers to make fair judgments. The power conferred through citations cuts both ways, conferring influence that can be used to elevate their contributions or to call attention to their failings. Citing an ethicist's professional sexual misconduct will not hamper the good that their theory can do once it is assessed by readers with all the relevant facts.

On the contrary, for the philosophers whose reputations *have* been destroyed by their professional sexual misconduct—whose work is no longer cited as a result, but who have nevertheless made valuable contributions to the field of philosophy and to public policy—our approach recuperates their work to an extent. Once cited with all the relevant facts, theories will not be thrown out without a fair hearing. To those worried that this citation practice will heedlessly ruin reputations and destroy lives, our proposal should offer a way forward that is fair and equitable.

4.3. The space for ethical inquiry

Perhaps, another objection goes, there should be a space open for people who are interested in ethical questions to become ethicists without having expectations of virtuous behavior thrust upon them. It may be true that ethicists should have a space of free inquiry—we are partial to that idea—but by abusing their power, ethicists who commit professional sexual misconduct threaten the creation and maintenance of such a space for others. Consider a 2020 post on the blog “What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?” titled “I’m still afraid of being around male professors.” A former graduate student in philosophy recounts a harrowing instance of sexual harassment by an ethics professor. She writes, “I admired this philosophy professor because he taught ethics and I believed that someone who taught ethics would be the last person to hurt me.” After his sexual attention escalated to unwanted physical contact, among other offenses, this student cut contact with the professor and left professional philosophy altogether (jennysaul 2020). This is only one case of the many detailed on the blog in which abuses of power created a toxic environment.

One may object that this citation practice could make academic philosophy look bad to the public by airing the discipline's dirty laundry, so to speak. However, philosophy as a discipline is already perceived as uniquely hostile to minorities. A 2015 article in *The Guardian* had the headline “Philosophy is for posh, white boys with trust funds—why are there so few women?” (Ratcliffe and Shaw 2015). Philosophy lags behind other disciplines in the humanities in equity, diversity, and inclusion measures (Wylie et al. 2021). Instead of making the discipline look worse, to the contrary, this citation practice could provide encouragement, especially to young women and survivors of sexual violence, and signal that philosophers are committed to reforming their discipline.

4.4. Caution against false allegations

One may raise concerns that the proposed practice incentivizes individuals to make false allegations. We take the risk of defamation seriously, as it represents a serious ethical harm in its own right. We can imagine an objection that academia is so competitive, people will start making allegations to undermine the reputation—and thereby the

research impact—of their competitors. Similarly, one might object that biases such as anti-queer prejudice can motivate false allegations. There have been concrete cases of competitiveness and bias motivating false allegations in the past. Sarah Viren and Marta Tecedor, a couple, had their academic job search threatened when a competing candidate made a spate of phony, anonymous sexual misconduct complaints against Tecedor (Viren 2020). This example underscores the particular danger of Title IX being abused, especially against queer and otherwise marginalized faculty (American Association of University Professors 2016, 79, 88; Srinivasan 2020, 1143).

Here is what we do not want to happen: a poorly substantiated allegation gets reproduced in print as a citation, hurting an already marginalized scholar. The risk of such an occurrence is nontrivial. However, we do not think this risk warrants abstaining from the citation practice altogether. Rather, it underscores the imperative for balanced, impartial presentation of credible allegations, rather than a presumption of guilt or innocence. The goal is informed scholarly discourse, not persecution.²⁶

Every scholar must exercise their own judgment, balancing the risk of amplifying a false allegation with the danger of further empowering an abuser through uncritical citation. Media literacy is essential in determining which accusations are credible, and although scholars may disagree about specific cases, we anticipate considerable overlap in their assessments. Such disagreements can also stimulate dialogue about sexual misconduct in the profession. A footnote acknowledging an ongoing case can prompt conversation without acting as a definitive ruling. For instance, if a case is ongoing, a citation could include a note like, “The case is ongoing; please check for the latest updates,” directing readers to look for the latest verified information. This approach ensures that citations are based on substantiated claims while providing a way to monitor the development of allegations, thereby reducing the chance of false reports.

Existing legal and social mechanisms should act as deterrents against frivolous allegations. Historically, victims have underreported incidents of misconduct (Aguilar and Baek 2020). One report found that only 15 percent of sexual misconduct victims on college campuses seek assistance (Cantor et al. 2020). Diverse factors contribute to such widespread under-reporting. Victims often refrain from coming forward due to fears of retaliation, damage to careers or reputations, and skepticism regarding authority responsiveness (American Association of University Women 2022). With the current institutional design, structural flaws enabling abuses of power perpetuate under-reporting, not over-reporting. The burdens of reporting often outweigh those borne by accused perpetrators.

Since victims who come forward confront substantial personal risks with very limited assurances of fair resolution, we have reasons to doubt that our proposed mechanism would encourage frivolous allegations. Additionally, the inclusion of the accused’s verdict and a robust rebuttal by the accused, if available, serve as safeguards. The ultimate determination of the merit of an allegation or rebuttal lies within the purview of readers, empowering them to discern the credibility of opposing claims.

4.5. Respecting the wishes of victims

The ethical aspect of honoring victims’ wishes emerges as a concern. There may be a delicate balance between the original objective of questioning the moral authority of the accused and the potential for unwanted and enduring exposure for victims.

Addressing cases where the victim remains unnamed provides a simpler solution: anonymity reduces the likelihood of incurring further damage. While trauma is deeply

personal and its triggers can be unpredictable, when victims have chosen to report a case while remaining anonymous, we may reasonably assume they have weighed the potential negative consequences.

Cases where the victim is named require extra due diligence and discernment from researchers. One idea is for existing databases tracking sexual misconduct in the field to include an opt-in/opt-out mechanism, granting victims control over the acknowledgment and lasting impact of their case in academic citations.²⁷ Precedents in data collection suggest this proposed solution may be feasible. The extensive narrative collection for the blog “What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?” (jennysaul 2021) and Karen Kelsky’s comprehensive data compilation “Sexual harassment in the academy: A crowdsourced survey” (n.d.) indicate a shared willingness of victims to contribute to a central data source for citations of misconduct.

What if victims do not wish to have their cases cited—do their wishes override the potential benefits of implementing our citation practice? What is owed to victims in these situations? These are difficult questions. On the one hand, we do not want to further traumatize the victims; on the other hand, the proposed citation merely directs more views to the original source, no new information is added. A sober truth is that many victims leave academia as a result of the misconduct, so they may not be exposed to the citations on an ongoing basis. Nevertheless, we contend that the wishes of victims should be respected where possible, that is, where their wishes are known.

5. Conclusion: continued reflection

We have argued that, when citing the work of ethicists with credible professional sexual misconduct allegations against them, scholars should impartially acknowledge the allegations in footnotes. In section 2, we argued that ethicists have moral authority that can be undermined by credible allegations of professional sexual misconduct. In section 3, building on the argument in the previous section, we introduced the citation practice, providing practical guidance on how and when to cite using our proposal. In Section 4, we addressed potential objections, including worries about false allegations.

In this article, we have restricted our proposal to the realm of ethics. Yet we invite further investigation into the broader applicability of the citation practice. Should the scope be limited to cases of sexual harassment, or should it extend to other forms of systematic injustice? One might worry that extension to other forms of injustice makes this citation practice a tool that can be abused; after all, not everyone agrees on what constitutes an injustice. We leave this question open for discussion.

Beyond concerns about the scope of application lies a meta-philosophical question: should personal conduct be analytically severed from philosophical production outside of the field of ethics? As Eric Schliesser writes, discussions about sexual misconduct and accountability “are not mere gossip or somehow orthogonal to true philosophy. For, critical reflection on the norms and practices of (professional) philosophy just is a part of philosophy in all kinds of ways (i.e., as elements of meta-philosophy, social epistemology, standpoint epistemology, the nature of intellectual virtue, etc.)” (2016). We hope this article carves out space to question the relationship between theory and practice across various disciplines.

As ethicists, we need continued reflection on how to navigate the complexities of addressing unethical conduct within academic philosophy. Here we have emphasized the importance of fostering transparency to encourage positive change.

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Notes

1 The Academic Sexual Misconduct Database unveils 21 documented cases of sexual misconduct within the field of philosophy (Libarkin 2025). These cases are instances where there exists a public finding or admission of guilt involving faculty and administrators in the United States. Many more cases have gone without a public finding or admission of guilt.

2 We use the terms “sexual harassment” and “sexual misconduct” to include a range of behaviors, such as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, more severe actions like sexual assault and exploitation, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile work environment. We use “allegations” instead of “convictions” to reflect the reality that many cases of sexual misconduct do not lead to convictions due to institutional failings, such as inadequate reporting systems and biases that hinder proper investigations.

3 We do not consider sexual harassment done by philosophers other than ethicists, or by academics of any discipline, any less harmful. Evaluating the ethical conduct of philosophers may be relevant when working in many, if not all, fields of philosophy. This citation practice might also be fruitful in other fields. We leave this matter open for further discussion.

4 Peter Ludlow in philosophy of language (Flaherty 2015b), Colin McGinn (Schuessler 2013) and John Searle (Baker 2017; Weinberg 2019) in philosophy of mind are recent examples.

5 This article does not constitute legal advice. For concerns about defamation in specific instances, we advise consulting a lawyer. The author and publisher of this material disclaim any liability for actions taken or not taken based on the information provided.

6 The authors go on to claim there are “spectacular examples of philosophers behaving badly,” some of which overlap with cases we discuss here (Besley et al. 2022, 2423). For a related discussion of sexual harassment in academia, see Jackson and Muñoz-García (2019).

7 Similarly, Epicurus, in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, holds that philosophy’s goal is to achieve happiness through virtuous living, suggesting philosophers must lead by example (Epicurus 1994). The Stoics, particularly Epictetus in *The discourses* (Epictetus 1983) and Seneca in *Letters to Lucilius* (Seneca 1969, 20.1), insist that philosophers must align their actions with their teachings, as failing to do so undermines the integrity of their moral philosophy. For the view that engaging in moral reflection makes ethicists—and everyone—better people, see Schwitzgebel and Rust 2009, 1054.

8 See also Tirrell 2018, 2.

9 Consider the language in the title of the anonymous *Thought Catalog* piece “I had an affair with my hero, a philosopher who’s famous for being ‘moral’” (Anonymous 2014). The author, a graduate student, viewed the global ethicist with whom she had an affair as a hero figure, famous not only for his work, but also for his moral standing.

10 For example, ethicist Kwame Anthony Appiah writes the weekly “The Ethics” column for the *New York Times* (Appiah n.d.). Work in feminist philosophy has also permeated popular discourse (see the article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which Kate Manne is dubbed “The philosopher of #metoo”, Doherty 2019). Moral philosophers’ expertise in ethics is why they are funded by universities, supported by taxpayer money, and occasionally even hired by corporations.

11 Survivors of sexual misconduct in academia have noted a gap between the theory and practice of professors who work on social justice issues but cause harm to their students and researchers (Anonymous 2014; Viaene et al. 2023). That this theory–practice gap is a repeated complaint among survivors suggests there is something amiss about the way some philosophers working on moral issues approach morality in practice. In the sexual harassment filing against ethicist Peter Singer, “the defendant told the plaintiff that he had sexual interest in her . . . the plaintiff expressed surprise given that the defendant was married and a professor of ethics” (Superior Court of California n.d.). This reaction suggests that the role of a professor of ethics carries moral significance for the plaintiff.

12 The anonymous author of the *Thought Catalog* piece, for example, was not wrong for believing that her hero was famous for being moral; rather, if the story is accurate, then her hero was wrong for using the language of moral philosophy to manipulate a young woman in a sexual setting.

13 For discussion of hypocrisy by a moral authority, see Carey (2024).

14 A Ph.D. student might appear to differ in kind from a professor of ethics, but even Ph.D. students possess moral authority to a degree roughly proportional to their ability to shape moral discourse to a smaller or larger extent (see Gordon-Smith 2025).

15 Classrooms and social media are important platforms for raising concerns about moral authority as well, though we argue in the next subsection that citations play a distinct and central role in shaping an academic's legacy and influence.

16 Credit and influence are mutually reinforcing: academics who have already made a mark with their research tend to receive greater recognition—more citations, among other forms of credit—for their contributions. See Merton 1968, whose landmark article relies on qualitative research by his wife, H. A. Zuckerman, in her 1965 thesis at Columbia University.

17 Citation patterns in philosophy may surprise some members of the field. Weatherson notes that it tends to take at least a decade for now-famous works in a given topic area to generate secondary literature (Weatherson 2022, 406). Philosophical research moves slowly, and influence permeates over time, making it that much more important to cite philosophers intentionally.

18 Sexism has long plagued higher education, and women of color have faced particularly strong backlash in their struggles for inclusion (Yancy 2018).

19 Here are two examples: “Some believe ethicists’ conduct is relevant to the assessment of their view. Thomas Pogge was accused of sexual misconduct (Remnick 2016; for Pogge’s response, see Pogge 2016).” “Some believe ethicists’ conduct is relevant to the assessment of their view. Anna Stubblefield was accused of sexual misconduct (Engber 2015, McMahan and Singer 2017, Moriarty 2018; for Stubblefield’s response, see August-Perna 2024).” If a stronger term than “sexual misconduct” or “accused” is desired, we recommend authors adhere precisely to the wording used in the source. Anna Stubblefield was not merely accused of sexual misconduct, she was convicted of “aggravated sexual assault”; the conviction was overturned, and in a retrial, she pleaded guilty to “third-degree aggravated criminal sexual contact” (Moriarty 2018). Authors may elect to use these terms. Moreover, though we encourage the authors to remain neutral on the *truth* of the allegation, they need not shy away from rendering judgment on the *relevance* of the allegation, given the ethical significance of sexual misconduct. An author could introduce the footnote by changing “Some believe” to “I believe ethicists’ conduct is relevant to the assessment of their view.”

20 There may be an apparent tension, in that we opened the article by arguing that institutional redress too often fails in cases of sexual misconduct, and yet we rely on official documents to give the content of the proposed citations. Institutions often fail at accountability, but they still generate documentation that can be publicly accessed, scrutinized, and supplemented by other credible sources. We treat institutional findings as a source of data, but cautiously, as we address false allegations in section 4.4.

21 Such information may also foster an awareness that counteracts implicit bias that leads scholars to cite white men disproportionately to their research produced in a given area. If scholars are made more aware of the power conferred by citations generally, they may become more conscientious about their own biases. For work on implicit bias in citations, see Jender 2013 and Healy 2013; for broader work on implicit bias and philosophy, see two recent edited volumes, Brownstein and Saul 2016a, 2016b.

22 Outside of philosophy, this occurred following allegations against Avital Ronell in comparative literature at NYU (Gluckman 2018) and John Comaroff in anthropology at Harvard (Kim and Xu 2022).

23 The chapter, in an edited volume titled *Sexual Misconduct in Academia: Informing an Ethics of Care in the University*, included auto-ethnographic accounts from three women of sexual harassment they experienced in the university. Perpetrators went unnamed, but one professor “felt he was being referred to . . . and threatened the authors with legal actions in the press. He also denounced the book and its editors among his networks” (Open Letter 2023). Routledge bowed to his legal threats and pulled the chapter from the volume before ultimately unpublishing the entire volume. Additionally, Dr Donya Ahmadi’s article on the Iranian MeToo movement was at risk of being pulled from *Women’s Studies International Forum* after an accused man threatened legal action, even though his case was mentioned only briefly in the social media sources cited in the article (Open Letter 2024). These two instances underscore the willingness of the accused to use legal threats to silence scholars, and the reticence of publishers to take a strong stance against sexual misconduct.

24 Models for equitable citation guidelines already exist. The feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* requires progressive, inclusive citation practices (Hypatia 2024). This codification of equitable citation as a requirement signals academia's growing commitment to such norms. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), with many journals and publishers as members, also provides ethical publishing guidelines. Were our suggested citation practice included in these guidelines, it could facilitate a cultural shift by influencing journals to adopt the practice.

25 If journal editors object to the addition of such a footnote, the customary allowance for authors to share a copy of their article on a personal website provides an avenue to post a draft with the footnote included. In this case, the author should note that the copy differs from that of the journal publication.

26 Critics of "carceral feminism" rightly point to the harms and injustices perpetuated by systems of accountability run by the state, especially prisons. "Abolition, as a tradition, a philosophy, and a theory of change," by contrast to carceral approaches to justice, "moves away from a myopic focus on the distinct institution of the prison toward a more expansive vision" of justice (Davis et al. 2022, 36). Our citation practice aims to shift the means of accountability into the hands of scholars, and thus may fit into an abolitionist vision for justice. However, because the practice partially depends on evidence from institutional markers such as the outcome of a Title IX investigation or a legal trial, it is vulnerable to anti-carceral criticisms. We can only stress that caution and fairness be exercised with all information that may be included in a citation.

27 Note that cases involving multiple victims introduce complexities in navigating diverse preferences within the affected group. As a guiding principle, we recommend prioritizing the wishes of the victims. Thus, our inclination leans toward omitting the information if one or more victims desires that. In cases involving co-authored papers with one individual accused of sexual harassment, the suggested citation practice could give rise to negative implications or complications for the co-author(s). These two concerns require further discussion and consideration.

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